

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MONITORING FOR THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

The Ramsar Convention (or, to give it its full name the “Convention on wetlands of international importance especially as waterfowl habitat”) is the first of the modern intergovernmental agreements on conservation and wise use of natural resources. As on October 1993, 80 governments had become members (or “Contracting Parties”). The four main obligations of member states are:

- to designate at least one wetland in their territory for the “List of wetlands of international importance“, and to maintain the ecological character of listed sites; the 80 members have so far designated 640 wetlands, covering over 42 million hectares (rather more than the total area of Germany) for the List;
- to make “wise use“ of all wetlands in their territory; this is interpreted to mean that members should develop a national wetland policy;
- to establish wetland reserves and provide trained staff for them;
- to promote international cooperation in wetland matters, whether in the field of cross-frontier wetlands, shared species or development aid affecting wetlands.

The convention will be well-known to most of the participants in the present workshop, since two of them actually took part in the conference held in 1971 in the

Iranian city of Ramsar where the text of the Convention was adopted, since the governments of all the countries represented are members, and since the Austrian government has been particularly active in application of the Convention: it designated five wetlands (all of them in cross-frontier locations) for the Ramsar List on accession in 1982, and has since added two more; it has established an active National Ramsar Committee which brings together representatives of the federal government, provincial governments and non-governmental organizations; it has made voluntary contributions to the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Fund, which helps the implementation of the Convention in developing countries; it has given particularly close attention to the recommendations of the Monitoring Procedure in the March-Auen Ramsar site; and it has declared 1993-1994 Year of the Wetlands.

It should be noted that the original text of the Convention is in many cases interpreted by decisions, resolutions or recommendations of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, held every three years. Thus, criteria for the identification of wetlands of international importance have been established, guidelines have been agreed for the implementation of the wise use concept, and the conference has established the Wetland Conservations Fund and two important mechanisms for maintaining ecological character of listed sites - the Montreux Record and the Monitoring Procedure, both discussed below. The

most recent meeting, held in Kushiro, Japan, in June 1993, agreed on guidelines for management of Ramsar sites, established the Scientific and Technical Review Panel and made further refinements to the Montreux Record and Monitoring Procedure.

THE MONTREUX RECORD AND MONITORING PROCEDURE

The Montreux Record and Monitoring Procedure are two mechanisms to help Contracting Parties maintain the ecological character of listed wetlands.

Article 2 of the convention covers the principles behind the designation of wetlands for the List. However, it is clear that listing alone will not be enough to fulfill the aims of the convention as set out in the preamble. In dynamic ecosystems like wetlands, action will be needed to achieve these aims, and so Article 3 deals with the consequences of listing: Article 3.1 states that "Contracting Parties shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of wetlands included in the List"; while Article 3.2 indicates that each Contracting Party shall inform the Bureau "if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the List has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollutions or other human interference".

This reference to change in "ecological character" should be emphasized. Ramsar listing does not mean that a wetland must never be used, nor that every single aspect of the site must be maintained for ever in exactly the same condition; it does mean that the fundamentals of its ecological functioning should be conserved.

In some cases, Contracting Parties have spontaneously reported actual or possible changes in ecological character of listed

wetlands at the time they arise. In others, reports have been sent to the Ramsar Bureau from other sources, and have been confirmed by the Party concerned. The reporting function has generally been carried out however through the national reports presented to the triennial Conference of the Parties, and these national reports present the principal source of information on the implementation of the Convention.

In response to these national reports, Recommendation 4.8 of the Montreux Conference in 1990 instructed the Bureau to maintain a record of Ramsar sites where such changes had occurred or were likely to occur. Resolution 5.4 of the 1993 Kushiro Conference refined the concept further in its Annex (attached to the present paper). The Montreux record is not in any sense a black list or a red list of "Ramsar sites in danger". It is established in consultation with the Contracting Party concerned and identifies priority sites for positive national and international conservation attention. As from 1994, the sites included in the Montreux Record will be included in an Annex to the regular publication of the Ramsar List. The first 1994 version is likely to include about 60 sites in about 30 states.

The Monitoring Procedure was also formalized at Montreux (see Annex 2 to the present paper). The term "monitoring" should not here be understood in its scientific sense of long-term detailed measurement and study of a variety of parameters affecting a wetland. What is meant is rather a mechanism for providing a Contracting Party with advice and recommendations on how to address actual or potential problems at a Ramsar site. Such advice may be given through examples from other Contracting Parties who have found solutions to comparable problems; it may involve visits to the sites by Bureau staff and/or relevant specialists. Priority for application of the Monitoring Procedure is naturally given to

sites included in the Montreux Record. Reports of Monitoring Procedure missions become public documents once the Contracting Party concerned has had an opportunity to study and comment on them.

Since the Montreux Conference, specific provision has been made in the Ramsar budget for operation of the Monitoring Procedure. In some cases, particularly where major investment is required, it has been difficult to carry out all the recommendations in Monitoring Procedure reports. Nevertheless, the procedure is increasingly being seen by the parties themselves and by wetland conservationists in general as a major implement for helping parties to overcome problems at Ramsar sites. The following paragraphs offer examples of application of the Monitoring Procedure.

(a) **March-Auen, Austria.** Following reports to the Bureau of increasingly intensive agricultural use of the Ramsar sites on the Austrian banks of the River March, and of transformation of flood meadows and woodland into arable land, a Ramsar mission visited the site (along the frontier with the Czech and Slovak Republics) in April 1991. Its recommendations were: that the federal and provincial authorities develop an overall concept for the management of the site; that the necessary administrative and financial means be provided for application of this concept; that cross-frontier initiatives be pursued, and that plans for the excavation of a canal joining the Danube and Oder go ahead only on the basis of the precautionary principle. The report also presented recommendations on the Donau-Auen sector of the site. The Austrian authorities have taken the recommendation on development of a concept for the wise use of the site very much to heart, and the federal and provincial authorities have cooperated with local non-governmental organizations to produce a

document which is to be formally presented to the Federal Minister in 1994.

(b) **Myvatn, Iceland.** This was an example of a preliminary, more informal application of the Monitoring Procedure. Already at the Montreux Conference a Recommendation noted the possible impact of sediment dredging at Myvatn. As this site of high biological productivity, where local people have for many years farmed land surrounding the lake and exploited its fisheries and nesting waterfowl, mining of diatomites from the bed of the lake for industrial processing in a nearby factory had been going on for some years. The factory had requested permission to extend its dredging operations, and concern had been expressed that this might have a negative effect on the lake's productivity. The Ramsar Bureau arranged for a small mission to visit the site in June 1992 and to comment on the situation in a letter to the Icelandic Minister of the Environment. The letter referred to the scientific studies in progress, drew parallels with other Ramsar sites and to the recent adoption of the precautionary principle in the Biodiversity Convention. At the Kushiuro conference in 1993, the Icelandic delegation announced that a bill had been introduced to the national assembly confining sediment dredging to a restricted area of the lake's northern basin, and that dredging would cease by the year 2010. As a result, the conference agreed that the site be removed from the Montreux Record.

(c) **St. Lucia system, South Africa.** This site too, had been mentioned in the recommendations of the Montreux conference, since mining for titanium and other heavy metals in the coastal dunes could affect the ecological character of this, Africa's oldest nature reserve. A Monitoring mission visited the site in

April 1992. Its report, conceived as a complement to the Environmental Impact Assessment being carried out by the South African authorities, suggested that the authorities consider whether, in view of the importance of the site, the mining application be refused on principle. It further recommends that, if the mining application were given serious consideration, special consideration be given to such issues as: possible alternative sources of ore; need for an environmental cost/benefit analysis; critical impacts on the St. Lucia system; the difficulties of dune restoration after mining and possible changes in land. The national EIA together with the Ramsar report was subjected to very detailed public scrutiny, since the documents were opened to public debate and discussion before an independent review panel made its recommendations to the government. These recommendations, made in late 1993 (after another recommendation from the Kushiro Conference), suggested that mining should not be allowed, and that special measures should be taken to improve the living standard of local people. The South African cabinet still has to take a final decision on the subject.

FUTURE RAMSAR WORK ON MONITORING

The terms “ecological character“ and “change in ecological character“ are very general in nature. It may be that it will prove too difficult to work out usable definitions, and that the Convention will continue to use them in their general sense. At the Kushiro Conference participants looked at a first draft of possible definitions. They felt that more study was needed and approved a recommendation calling for guidelines defining these concepts to be presented to the next conference of the Contracting

Parties, to be held in Australia in 1996. The convention’s new Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) will take the lead in producing these guidelines.

As noted above, the Ramsar Monitoring Procedure does not deal with monitoring in its usual scientific sense. This scientific sense will however undoubtedly be called upon in drawing up the guidelines, since change can be often only be measured by a long-term process of detailed scientific inquiry. Equally, change can only be measured against an agreed starting-point, and this will mean increased use and increased precision of the Ramsar database and data-collecting operation (existing Ramsar mechanisms include a standardized data sheet and wetland classification system).

The present workshop has carried forward the reflection on these complex and difficult issues, and the Ramsar Bureau and STRP will look forward to input from participants into the ongoing discussion.

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MONITORING PROCEDURE

1. It comes to the attention of the Bureau that the ecological character of a listed wetland is changing or is likely to change as a result of technological development, pollution or other human interference.
2. Where appropriate, the Bureau shall propose to the Contracting Party or Parties concerned to apply the Monitoring Procedure, requesting, at the same time, additional information on the status of the wetland concerned.
3. Where, as a result of this procedure and other information available of the Bureau, the Bureau is of the opinion that there is evidence of significant change or likely change in the ecological character of a listed wetland, the Bureau shall collaborate with the Contracting Party or Parties concerned to arrive at an acceptable solution and the Bureau may offer advice and assistance to that Party or those Parties, if required. The Bureau shall inform the Standing Committee of any action it has taken in this connection.
4. If it does not appear that an acceptable solution can be readily achieved, the Bureau shall immediately bring the matter to the attention of the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee, acting through the Chairman and Secretary, provided by the Bureau, may pursue the matter, in direct contact with the Contracting Party or Parties concerned and, where appropriate, with other responsible agencies or bodies, with a view to helping to find a solution.
5. In the event of alterations to the List or changes in ecological character in wetlands included therein, the Standing Committee shall arrange for the information to be circulated for discussion at the next Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties in accordance with Article 8 paragraph 2 (d) of the Convention.
6. The Bureau shall periodically review and report progress on the conservation status of sites to which its attention has been drawn under this procedure. To facilitate follow-up, the Bureau shall maintain a register of activities undertaken in this connection.

MONTREUX RECORD

‘Record of Ramsar sites where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur’

1. the Convention Bureau shall draw up the Montreux Record initially on the basis of sites listed in paragraph 224 of document INF. C.4.18, prepared from National Reports submitted to the Fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties. Sites that have come to the attention of the Convention Bureau subsequently shall be included in the Montreux Record subject to the procedure outlined below (points 2-4).
2. It comes to the attention of the Convention Bureau that the ecological character of a Ramsar site may have changed, may be changing, or may be likely to change as a result of technological development, pollution, or other human interference.
3. If relevant consultations are not already in progress, the Convention Bureau shall contact the contracting Party concerned, requesting additional information on the status of the site.
4. When, following such consultations, it is confirmed that the site has undergone, is undergoing, or is likely to undergo change in ecological character, the Convention Bureau, in agreement with the contracting Party concerned, and in consultation with the Scientific and Technical Review panel, shall add the site to the Montreux Record.
5. The Montreux Record shall indicate those sites where the Monitoring Procedure has been or is being implemented, as well as those sites where a Contracting Party has already identified and/or begun to implement remedial actions. Contracting Parties shall provide annual reports to the Convention Bureau on the conservation situation at sites included on the Montreux Record.
6. The Convention Bureau, in agreement with the Contracting Party concerned, and in consultation with the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, shall remove a site from the Montreux Record upon receipt of documents detailing either the remedial actions implemented successfully at the site, or the reasons why the ecological character of a site is no longer likely to change.
7. The Montreux Record shall be maintained as part of the Ramsar database and shall be subject to continuous review. Copies of the Record shall be available to contracting Parties and other interested bodies upon request, but shall in any case be included with the regular circulation of the List.